

INTER-MUNICIPAL COOPERATION AS A TOOL OF RESILIENCE IN SMALL COMMUNITIES*

István HOFFMAN

István HOFFMAN

Professor, PhD, dr. habil., Department of Administrative Law,
Faculty of Law, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary
Tel.: 0036-1-4116519
E-mail: hoffman.istvan@ajk.elte.hu

Abstract

The hypothesis of the paper is that the resilience of small communities can be engaged by inter-municipal cooperation. The economy of scale of public services is a great challenge for the small communities in Europe. The review of the international models will focus on the models based on the merge of the municipalities and on the models based on the engagement of inter-municipal cooperation. The literature on these reforms will be reviewed. Based on the hypothesis, the regulation on inter-municipal cooperation and service provision of the rural areas in Hungary in the last two decades will be shortly presented. As part of this research, empirical research was carried out in a Hungarian rural area, which has a strong inter-municipal cooperation. Similarly, empirical research has been carried out in a Slovenian rural area which is based on the merge of the small communities. The advantages and disadvantages of the inter-municipal model, and the model based on the merge of the communities were compared in the paper: efficient units of public services provision can be established not only by the merge of the communities but by the establishment of inter-municipal associations. Although decision-making is more complicated, the small communities could be more resilient based on this model, because the flexibility and the community building of the small municipal model prevail as well. The merge of the municipalities offers more efficient decision-making, but the resilience engaged by the grassroots service provision requires some administrative actions in this model.

Keywords: inter-municipal cooperation, small municipalities, merging of municipalities, comparative analysis, Hungary, Slovenia.

* **Acknowledgement:** This article was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and by the ÚNKP Bolyai+ Research Scholarship.

1. Introduction

In Hungary, the system and the provision of public services have changed radically in the last decade. Previously, the system was based on a strong, but fragmented municipal system and the reforms of the early 2010s were driven by centralization – and partly on concentration – of public service provision (Balázs and Hoffman, 2017, pp. 13-15). The regulatory methods and the related budgetary support system were adjusted to serve this aim. Although a new centralized public service provision system has been created, the municipal administration was concentrated by the establishment of the joint municipal offices which can be considered as obligatory inter-municipal cooperation (Hoffman *et al.*, 2016, pp. 464-465).

The primary research method is a jurisprudential one, but the effects of the regulation and the practical outcome of the new system of municipal finance will be analyzed as well. An empirical study was carried out in a Hungarian and a Slovenian rural area, through which the differences of the inter-municipal approach and the merge of the communities can be observed.

First of all, I would like to have an European overview, in which we would like to analyze the transformation of the rural governance in the European countries, and to analyze the trends of changes. After the short review, I would like to analyze the transformation of the Hungarian system, and the effects of the reforms, especially the transformation of the municipal roles. The resilience of the small communities can be observed by these changes because the former paradigm has been radically changed in the first half of this decade. Therefore, empirical research is required for the analysis of these tasks. Thus, The Department of Administrative Law of Faculty of Law, Eötvös Loránd University has accomplished a research on the inter-municipal cooperation of the rural areas. In our research, we put an emphasis on the fact that the presence of inter-municipal cooperation in the Hungarian municipal system serves as a tool of self-governance and resilience tool in the continental local government systems (Pálné Kovács, 2016, p. 585).

2. Methods and approaches of the comparative municipal law

The analysis is focused on the legal regulations on inter-municipal cooperation. Primarily the regulation on municipal system and tasks were analyzed. Beside the jurisprudential analysis, the research also included an empirical inquiry regarding the role of the inter-municipal cooperation in a given rural area. The jurisprudential analysis focuses on the Hungarian regulation. It will be shown that the Hungarian municipal system is a fragmented one which is based on the municipal status of the small communities, comparative research was carried out in a country with a similar municipal system: partly based on the merged small communities and partly on the inter-municipal cooperation of these units.

The practice of a Slovenian rural area has been analyzed, as well. The empirical research – which has been based on the jurisprudential and financial analysis of the facultative service provision of several municipalities – was based on a qualitative method. Semi-structured interviews were done from the summer of 2018 to the spring of 2019. The number of municipalities was limited due to the pilot nature of the research and the limited resources. The research was focused on the analysis of several characteristic municipalities in detail.

The selection of the analyzed rural area has been based on the hypothesis that the task performance of the smaller municipalities could be based on the cooperation with a given rural area (Nagy, 2017, pp. 24-25). We have examined similar rural units (with approx. 9,000 inhabitants) in Hungary and in Slovenia. Both have a central community, which has approximately 5,000 inhabitants, and the economy of both areas is based on the significant role of tourism. The micro-region of Balatonlelle (Hungary) has been analyzed in Hungary. Its central community is Town Municipality Balatonlelle, which has approximately 5,000 inhabitants, and 6 – mainly small – municipalities belong to the surrounding area (the 6 municipalities have a total population of approx. 3,500 inhabitants). In Slovenia, a similar area was analyzed: the municipality of Bled. It is a merged municipality with three communities; the central one is Bled at the Lake Bled with 5,500 inhabitants.

3. Inter-municipal cooperation and fragmented spatial structure in Hungary

3.1. *Fragmented spatial structure in Hungary and its consequences: a short historical review*

Hungary has a fragmented spatial structure. The majority of the Hungarian municipalities had less than 1,000 inhabitants in 2010 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Population of the Hungarian municipalities (1990-2010)

Year	0-499	500-999	1,000-1,999	2,000-4,999	5,000-9,999	10,000-19,999	20,000-49,999	50,000-99,999	100,000-	All
Inhabitants										
1990	965	709	646	479	130	80	40	12	9	3,070
2000	1,033	688	657	483	138	76	39	12	9	3,135
2010	1,086	672	635	482	133	83	41	11	9	3,152

Source: Szigeti (2013, p. 282)

The governance of the rural areas in Hungary has been based on this condition, and the (inter-communal) cooperation had a significant role. Although after World War II, Hungary belonged to the Communist Block, the transformation of the spa-

tial structure had similar ways from the 1960s, when a new tool of the rural governance appeared: the merger of the municipalities. The main form of this merging process was the formation of the common village councils (*községi közös tanács*). Although merging communities was an important element of the new reforms, the intercommunal associations were reborn. The cooperation between towns and villages was not solved by the merge of the municipalities, and the town areas were not universal in the 1970s (Balázs and Hoffman, 2017, p. 9). In 1990 a new, local government system was established by the Amendment of the Constitution and by the Act LXV of 1990 on the Local Self-Governments (hereinafter: Ötv). This system was a two-tier, but local-level centered system. The local-centered nature of the Hungarian local government system was strengthened by the system of voluntary inter-municipal associations. Article 44/A of the amended (former) Constitution declared that the right to cooperate is a fundamental right of municipalities. These rights had similar constitutional protection as human rights, only at a lower level. Therefore, the introduction of a compulsory inter-municipal association system was very difficult (Verebélyi, 1999, pp. 30-36), almost impossible, due to the requirement of a broad political consensus (two-third majority act) to establish them.

Meanwhile, local public service systems – which were built on the duties and responsibilities of the local governments – had several dysfunctional elements. The main dysfunctional element was the fragmented spatial structure which was strengthened by democratic changes, as a counterpart to former Communist times: where compulsory inter-municipal associations (the above presented common village councils) treated size inefficiency problems. As it was mentioned, this type of inter-municipal cooperation was the merger of villages practically, as village councils and their administration were basically amalgamated. This compulsory form was unpopular among Hungarian municipalities; therefore, it disappeared with the democratic changes, giving opportunity to a disintegration tendency in the transition period (Hoffman, 2009, pp. 130-132).

This fragmentation and the related size inefficiency problem was tried to be solved by inter-municipal cooperation. The inter-municipal system of the Ötv was based on voluntary cooperation. The new types of associations could not stop the disintegration because of their voluntary nature and the poor financial support provided by the central budget. In 1994 a partial review of the regulation took place. The paradigm of the voluntary inter-municipal cooperation remained but supplementary funding from the central budget was introduced by the legislation for the establishment of inter-municipal associations and for their service delivery (Balázs and Hoffman, 2017, pp. 10-12). As a result of these reforms, the number of inter-municipal associations radically increased after 1997 (see Table 2).

The joined form of municipal administration was stimulated as well. The establishment of joint municipal clerks was strongly supported by the central budget. The disintegration tendencies of Hungarian local administration stopped at the end

Table 2: Number of the inter-municipal associations responsible for public service provision between 1992 and 2005

Year	Number of the inter-municipal associations responsible for public service provision
1992	120
1994	116
1997	489
1998	748
1999	880
2003	1,274
2005	1,586

Source: Belügyminisztérium (2005, p. 205)

of the 1990s, giving place to the concentration of the municipal administration in rural areas. In 2004, a new type of inter-municipal association was introduced by the Hungarian legislation – the multi-purpose micro-regional association – based on the French inter-municipal association form ‘SIVOM’. The central government significantly supported service delivery through associations: in 2004, the share of the special subsidies for them was 1.19% of the whole central government subsidies for local governments, and in 2011 it already reached 2.91% (Hoffman, 2011, p. 31). A pure concentration tendency could be observed in the field of the Hungarian local public services from the late 1990s. The problems of size inefficiency and economies of scale were tackled within the municipal system by inter-municipal associations. A centrally encouraged inter-municipal system seemed to be a key for the resilience of the small municipalities, which can provide the basic services jointly for their inhabitants (Szabó, 2019, pp. 105-106).

3.2. The transformation of the framework: new challenges after the municipal reforms of the first years of the 2010s

The legal status of the Hungarian municipalities is determined by the new constitutional rules on the local self-governance. The former regulation was changed radically, the former decentralized model of the Ötv has been transformed by the new Constitution – the Fundamental Law of Hungary – and by the new Municipal Code – the Act CLXXXIX of 2011 on the Local Self-Governments of Hungary (hereinafter Möt). Formerly the right to self-governance was institutionalized as a collective right by the Constitution, but the Fundamental Law defines the elements of the self-governance as competences. The Constitutional Court stated that the local governments do not have fundamental rights, therefore they cannot sue constitutional complaints. Practically, the legislation has a very broad competence to define the legal status of the municipalities.

A simple solution has been chosen by the central government to reduce the fragmentation of the public service system: the most problematic service provisions were centralized and now they are performed by the local agencies of the central governments (Nagy, 2017, pp. 23-25). The main tasks of the education, inpatient care, residential social care, and residential child protection are performed by these agencies. The maintenance of the state-run schools belongs to the responsibilities of the Klebelsberg Center which has been defined as a central government agency with regional bodies (Fazekas, 2014, p. 299). The residential social care and children protection institutes are maintained by the county directorates (agencies) of the Directorate General of the Social and Children Protection. The inpatient health care institutions are maintained by the National Healthcare Service Center. The local governments are mainly responsible for the local public utilities, for the maintenance of the kindergartens, for basic social care, for basic services of child protection, and for cultural services. The municipal tasks have been significantly reduced, which is reflected by the size of the local government expenditure: before the reforms, in 2010 the total local government expenditure was 12.8% of the GDP, while in 2017 it was 6.0% only (see Table 5).

Table 3: Local government total expenditure in Hungary (in % of the GDP) 2002-2017

Year	2002	2006	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Local government total expenditure (in % of the GDP)	12.9%	13.0%	12.8%	11.6%	9.4%	7.6%	7.9%	8.1%	6.0%	6.3%

Source: Eurostat (2019)

The new municipal legislation tried to reduce the fragmentation of the spatial system by strengthening the towns which could now be responsible for service provision for the small municipalities of their town area as well. The legislator retained inter-municipal associations in a simplified form, with only one type of the inter-municipal association, which is a multi-purpose one with legal personality, managed by a council. Even though the former unincorporated forms should have been transformed, instead they just disappeared. A new type of the association evolved. It can be described as an umbrella organization because the former independently organized associations – which did not have legal personality – could be mainly integrated into this new type of inter-municipal association (Nagy and Hoffman, 2014, pp. 309-312). Because of the lack of the incentives and the centralized municipal tasks – practically the main tasks of the former associations were centralized, and these tasks are performed now by the central government and by its agencies – the number of the voluntary association seriously – by approx. 40% – dropped (see Table 4).

Table 4: Number of the (voluntary) intercommunal associations in 2013 and 2014

Year	Number of (voluntary) intercommunal associations
2013	1185
2014	709

Source: Balázs and Hoffman (2017, p. 16)

The freedom of establishment of municipal bodies has been reduced by the institutionalization of the joined municipal administrations. A new, compulsory form of the inter-municipal cooperation has been established by the Mötvt: the joint municipal office (Balázs, 2014, p. 426). Villages of the same district (*járás*) having less than 2,000 inhabitants are obliged to take part in these associations¹. Villages having more than 2,000 inhabitants and towns can take part in such an association, if they become the headquarter municipality of these offices.

The small municipalities faced new challenges: several important municipal tasks – especially the education and partly the culture and social care – have been centralized, the former state aid for the (voluntary) inter-municipal cooperation has been reduced, and an obligatory joint municipal administration model has been introduced.

4. Consolidation of the new structure and the inter-municipal cooperation as a tool for the resilience of small municipalities

4.1. *The new model of the joint municipal administration*

The new model is based on the limited responsibility of the municipalities and a joint municipal administration model. It seemed that the inter-municipal administration will be based on the obligatory joint administration, which was introduced during the first half of the 2010s. These joint municipal offices – which have been institutionalized as an obligatory inter-municipal cooperation (Swianiewicz and Teles, 2019, pp. 132-122; Rozsnyai, 2019, pp. 18-19; Fazekas, 2018, p. 217) – became the common form of the administration of the Hungarian rural municipalities (see Table 5).

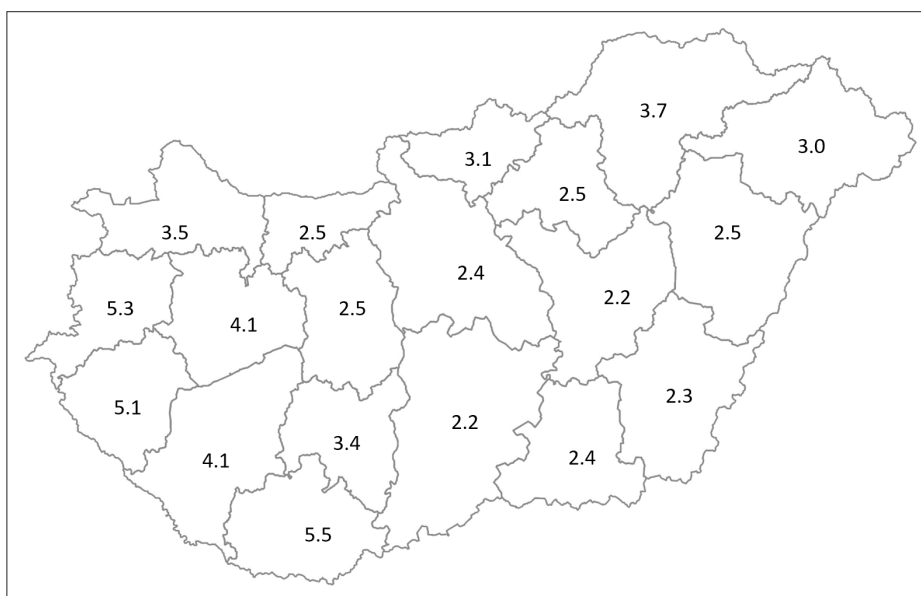
¹ There are only a few exceptions: the common office could have less than 2,000 inhabitants, if at least 7 municipalities take part in the cooperation, or if the population is at least 1,500 inhabitants and the protection of the right of the (national) minorities requires the independent office. I would like to note that this – ethnic minority-based exception – has been modelled after the administration of three villages in county Vas, which have Slovenian majority.

Table 5: Number of joint municipal offices and independent municipal offices in 2014 and 2018

Year	Joint municipal offices		Number of the (independent) municipal offices (mayor's offices)	Number of local municipalities in Hungary
	Number of joint municipal offices	Number of participant municipalities		
2014	749	2,632	521	3,176
2018	738	2,632	546	3,178

Source: Balázs and Hoffman (2017, p. 17); Szabó (2019, pp. 102-106)

The reason for this transformation is that most of the Hungarian local self-governments have less than 2,000 inhabitants. The fact that at least 2,000 inhabitants should be provided by the joint municipal offices resulted in a dual system. In those counties which have a very fragmented spatial structure (especially in Northern Hungary and in Western and Southwestern counties) the joint municipal offices were established by more than three (sometimes more than 4 or 5) village municipalities, and the (independent) municipal offices (the mayor's offices) are rare. In the Eastern and in several Central counties, where the average population of the municipalities is relatively high, the number of the members of the joint municipalities are lower (mainly 2 or maximum 3), and the independent municipal offices are more common (see Table 6).

**Figure 1:** Average number of members of joint municipal offices in 2018

The administration of small municipalities is now based on the inter-municipal model, which can be distinguished as a concentration of the municipal administration. Several advantages can be observed: the administration of the small villages

Table 6: Number of joint municipal offices and independent municipal offices in 2018

County	Number of (1st tier) municipalities	Number of (independent) municipal offices	Number of joint municipal offices	Number of municipalities which are members of joint municipal offices	Average number of members of joint municipal offices
Bács-Kiskun	119	43	34	76	2.2
Baranya	301	5	54	296	5.5
Békés	75	26	21	49	2.3
Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén	358	37	86	321	3.7
Budapest	24	24	0	0	
Csongrád	60	26	14	34	2.4
Fejér	108	36	29	72	2.5
Győr-Moson-Sopron	183	20	47	163	3.5
Hajdú-Bihar	82	34	19	48	2.5
Heves	121	19	41	102	2.5
Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok	78	32	21	46	2.2
Komárom-Esztergom	76	24	21	52	2.5
Nógrád	131	9	39	122	3.1
Pest	187	121	27	66	2.4
Somogy	246	10	57	236	4.1
Szabolcs-Szatmár Bereg	229	50	60	179	3.0
Tolna	109	11	29	98	3.4
Vas	216	4	40	212	5.3
Veszprém	217	9	50	208	4.1
Zala	258	6	49	252	5.1
Total	3,178	546	738	2,632	3.6

Source: Szabó (2019, pp. 102-106)

became more professional because the former ‘mini offices’ were abolished. Although the majority of these offices have approximately 12-15 civil servants, it is a progress compared to the former system, where offices in the small villages had only 5-6 civil servants typically.

4.2. *Based on the joint municipal offices – the rebuilding of the system of inter-municipal voluntary associations*

The number of the inter-municipal voluntary associations has been decreased significantly after 2013. This decrease has had multiple reasons. First of all, the municipal tasks have been reduced significantly after 2011/2012. The majority of the public education institutions (elementary and secondary schools, vocational education and hostels for the schoolboys and schoolgirls), the residential child care, the majority of the residential social care services, and several cultural tasks were nationalized, thus the municipal nature of the tasks was abolished. The options for creating an inter-municipal cooperation have been limited by the new public service provision model (Hoffman *et al.*, 2016, pp. 461-465).

Secondly, the support of the budget for encouraging inter-municipal cooperation has been reduced. This support was an important factor in the increasing number of inter-municipal associations during the late 1990s and 2000s (Hoffman *et al.*, 2016, pp. 457-459).

Thirdly, the umbrella associations are preferred by the new regulation on inter-municipal association. The legal personality of the associations required more complex administrative structures; therefore, several inter-municipal associations have been merged into larger ones (Balázs and Hoffman, 2017, pp. 15-17).

A silent transformation of the Hungarian inter-municipal system can be observed. Although the number of associations was significantly decreased in 2013/2014, the trend has changed in the last years (see Table 7).

Table 7: Number of the (voluntary) intercommunal associations from 2013 to 2018

Year	Number of (voluntary) intercommunal associations
2013	1185
2014	709
2018	1000

Source: Balázs and Hoffman (2017, p. 17); Szabó (2019, pp. 102-106)

It is obvious that the former model has been partially rebuilt. The rebuilding of the system of voluntary inter-municipal cooperation can be analyzed by the review of the number of these associations by counties (see Table 8).

The number of voluntary inter-municipal associations is higher in those counties which have fragmented spatial structure. A correlation can be observed by the

Table 8: Number of the (voluntary) intercommunal associations by counties in 2018

County	Number of (1st tier) municipalities	Number of villages	Number of voluntary inter-municipal associations
Bács-Kiskun	119	97	48
Baranya	301	287	85
Békés	75	53	25
Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén	358	329	86
Budapest	24	0	2
Csongrád	60	50	33
Fejér	108	91	27
Győr-Moson-Sopron	183	171	50
Hajdú-Bihar	82	61	36
Heves	121	110	59
Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok	78	56	37
Komárom-Esztergom	76	64	14
Nógrád	131	125	43
Pest	187	133	61
Somogy	246	230	68
Szabolcs-Szatmár Bereg	229	201	93
Tolna	109	98	48
Vas	216	203	50
Veszprém	217	202	66
Zala	258	248	69
Hungary	3178	2809	1000

Source: Szabó (2019, pp. 102-106)

comparison of the number of these voluntary associations to the number of the joint municipal offices. The joint municipal offices can be interpreted as a ‘catalyst’ of the inter-municipal associations. The joint administration put forward a joint public service provision model, thus the management of the service provision system of the small villages has been strengthened by the new model. Although the joint municipal offices have been a catalyst, the state aid has remained limited. The voluntary decision of the municipalities resulted in the increasing number of this cooperation which was based on the effectiveness of the service provision and the requirement of the quality of the provision in the small villages, as well. The role of the small communities is preferred by the new rules on inter-municipal cooperation because the principle in the decision-making is the ‘one member – one vote’, thus the small villages have a relatively significant influence on the decisions of the associations.

The profile of these associations has been transformed in the last year. During the 2000s the associations were established partly for the classical administrative tasks and for public service provision. Because of the obligatory establishment of the joint municipal offices, the new inter-municipal associations are mainly based on the joint public service provisions. The main field of the joint administrative task management is the joint municipal office. The joint service provision is based on the municipal offices; the territorial scope is different from the 2000s. The new cooperation is mainly a cooperation of the neighboring villages (so-called micro-districts) and not the cooperation of the towns and villages in a small (micro) region.

5. A comparative case study: social care provision by an inter-municipal association (in Hungary) and by a merged municipality (Slovenia). The case study of Balatonlelle (Hungary, Somogy County) and Bled (Slovenia)

5.1. Framework of the comparison

The Hungarian and Slovenian municipal systems can be considered as similar ones. This is also attributable to the fact that partly due to the small size and population of the country, equaling roughly one-fifth of Hungary, the Slovenian model is based on strong centralization. As an important difference between the two systems, however, is that a single-tier system of local government is established in Slovenia, notwithstanding several attempts at reform (Setnikar-Cankar, 2011, pp. 641-643). Moreover, although the high level of concentration implemented in the socialist era was eased in the course of local government reform in 1993 and 1994, it remains relatively concentrated. Currently, 212 municipalities operate in Slovenia, 11 of which are city municipalities. This means that the Slovenian local governments cover an average of 9-10,000 inhabitants, and are generally composed of several architecturally separate municipalities. In other words, Slovenian local governments cover a unit corresponding to a Hungarian micro-district. Although the system is concentrated, there are major differences in municipality size: the largest one, Ljubljana, has 283,000 inhabitants, while the smallest one, Hodoš, has 375 inhabitants. Taking this into account, the role of partnerships is significantly smaller within the Slovenian system; the Slovenian model does not require mandatory partnerships. Solutions involving partnerships are strongly encouraged on a sectoral level².

2 Voluntary inter-municipal associations promoted with financial incentives play a key role in local law enforcement in Slovenia, and Slovenian partnerships also perform important tasks in regional development and regional coordination (Bačlija-Brajnik, 2018, pp. 251-253).

Regarding social tasks it is necessary to note that the tasks of Slovenian local governments are relatively limited; they are directly responsible for providing home assistance, home assistance with a signaling system, certain crisis services, and home meal services, but they are only required to provide access in relation to other services. Thus, the involvement of local governments in this area is significantly more limited than in Hungary, although by providing such basic services, Slovenian municipalities are key actors in the provision of social services (Hlebec, 2017, pp. 496-505). The differences and similarities suggest that the systems of the two states lend themselves to comparison. The analysis of the Slovenian solutions is particularly interesting because these are applied within a concentrated and centralized system, where small municipalities are not independent; practically all – even the smallest local government – consist of several municipalities. In contrast, within the system aimed at maintaining the independence of small municipalities, cooperation between local governments and best practices emerging from it may obviously play an important role.

5.2. Example of successfully providing services within a partnership: Joint Family and Child Welfare Service of Balatonlelle and Partnership for Internal Control

Balatonlelle has traditionally demonstrated best practices in the provision of services through partnership and in cooperation between the micro-district center and its catchment area. Since 2005 some social services in Balatonlelle have been provided through an inter-municipal association called the Joint Family and Child Welfare Service of Balatonlelle and Inter-Municipal Association for Internal Control. The inter-municipal association currently has seven municipalities³ as members. The multi-purpose sub-regional inter-municipal association – with the participation of 14 local governments up to 2013 – had been the direct precedent to this association. Due to the termination of the small regional system by the Mötv, the association was significantly transformed. It continued to operate basically within the neighboring municipalities of Balatonlelle, i.e. it became essentially a partnership at (peri-urban) micro-regional level (Pálné Kovács, 2016, p. 594). Taking into account the substantial reform of the mandatory tasks of local governments implemented since 2012, the provision of municipal welfare gained in relevance in partnership cooperation. The partnership provides social services through the Common Family and Child Welfare Service of Balatonlelle. Such services include a social kitchen, including three cooking kitchens operated in different municipalities. Home assistance is provided with the help of 5-6 employees; there are more

3 Balatonlelle, Karád, Látrány, Visz, Somogytúr, Somogybabod, Gamás.

than one hundred people who may receive care. The population pyramid of the municipalities is unfavorable; there are many old people, therefore it is also important to provide care for the elderly in smaller neighboring villages. Currently, 30 old people can be provided care in the daytime. Although not comprising part of the institutions of the partnership, there is a club for the elderly in Balatonlelle that is open to the inhabitants of partnering local governments free of charge. Home assistance with a signaling system and parental assistance is also provided, and since 2016 family and child welfare services are provided in the form of a partnership.

In the course of developing the partnership, the aim was to establish an efficient, coordinated, but at the same time citizen-friendly system of services that also supports the conservation of municipal identity. Although the partnership is seated in Balatonlelle, it has several branch offices, and the employees taking part in the organization of services generally conduct their activity in the given municipalities. Thus, joint and efficient organization of services is connected to a municipality-centered system, where everybody can access basic services at their own place of residence, without travel. In the course of providing services, the public employees of institutions cooperate with the representative bodies and mayors of municipalities, thus mayors also have a clear picture of needs when having to determine municipal funds, and service personnel can also indicate to mayors and representative bodies the life situations in need of and entitled to intervention.

The 'one member – one vote' principle, noted above, strengthens focus on municipalities within the association, serving as a quasi-guarantee for full consideration of aspects of small municipalities. In the course of the interview conducted in the autumn of 2018, the mayors participating in the associations emphasized that according to the municipality's estimates, its costs would increase by 40% if it had to provide these services independently, at the municipal level, but at current standards. Within the scope of welfare services, general practitioner services have for a long time operated within the framework of an independent inter-municipal association.

5.3. Bled – joint local government of the small city and its region

Owing to similarities with Balatonlelle, the local government of the Slovenian city of Bled also provides an appropriate basis for comparison for the analysis of partnerships. Partnerships play a lesser role also on account of the one-tier local government system in Slovenia (Setnikar-Cankar, 2011, pp. 641-643). There are no mandatory partnerships, but there are sectoral areas in which the establishment of partnerships is supported, such as local law enforcement (Bačlija-Brajnik, 2018, pp. 251-253).

Bled does not operate a complex partnership scheme like Balatonlelle, especially not in the area of substantial social administration as is the case in Balatonlelle. In

this area Bled – in addition to funding provided by the state – performs its mandatory duties and provides financial support (Nagy *et al.*, 2019, pp. 169-174). Social services, namely, are provided by the municipality in Bled. Thus, tasks are performed within a merged framework of local government instead of the partnership scheme operated in Balatonlelle. The conservation of the identity of smaller village ‘parts of the municipality’ (with 1,500 and 1,000 inhabitants) (essentially villages under one local government) under one local government with Bled is a priority within the merged system, although municipal identity is to be primarily conserved by means of cultural services. In the course of providing social services, the service system seated in Bled provides the services. Separate service points in parts of the municipality were not organized, but obviously, efforts are made to ensure that the carer and not the cared is mobilized, if possible. The central location and good accessibility of the Bled unit is the main reason for the above, strongly centralized organization of services.

6. Conclusions

The provision of public services in small villages can be organized differently, but two main approaches have been evolved: the inter-municipal cooperation and the merge of the municipalities. A third solution is the centralization of the services when the provider is an agency of the central government. These models have been analyzed – mainly in the light of the transformations of the Hungarian regulation. In Hungary, the inter-municipal approach became more significant during the late 1990s and in the 2000s, but the reforms of the 2010s resulted in a strongly centralized model. Although the Hungarian model became one of the most centralized in Europe, the inter-municipal system has been partly rebuilt in the second half of this decade, and it was based on the joint municipal offices. The new model was an evolutionary one, and it focuses on the effective service provision of the small villages. It is an element of the resilience of these small municipalities.

In 2018 and 2019 this inter-municipal approach was compared to an approach based on the merge of the municipalities by an empirical case study. The service provision of a similar Hungarian and Slovenian rural area was compared. It is clear that the Hungarian solution has been more complex, but it fulfils its main aim: an effective service provision for a town and its neighboring villages. The Slovenian model is a simpler one, but the small villages have a limited role in that approach.

An inter-municipal model can be a tool for the resilience of the small villages: their independence and identity can be guaranteed meanwhile an effective service provision model can be established.

References:

1. Act CLXXXIX of 2011 on the Local Self-Governments of Hungary (Mötv).
2. Act LXV of 1990 on the Local Self-Governments (Ötv).
3. Bačlija-Brajnik, I, 'Inter-municipal Cooperation in Slovenia: An Intermediate Step Towards Regionalisation', in Teles, F. and Swianiewicz, P. (eds.), *Inter-Municipal Cooperation in Europe*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 245-257.
4. Balázs, I. and Hoffman, I., 'Can (Re)Centralization Be a Modern Governance in Rural Areas', 2017. *Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences*, no. 50E, pp. 5-20.
5. Balázs, I., 'L'intercommunalité en Hongrie', in Steckel-Assouère, M.C. (ed.), *Regards croisés sur les mutations de l'intercommunalité*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014, pp. 425-435.
6. Belügyminisztérium, *A helyi önkormányzati rendszer tizenöt éve. 1990-2005. 15 év a magyar demokrácia szolgálatában*, Budapest: BM Duna Palota és Kiadó, 2005.
7. Eurostat, 'Total Government Expenditures', 2019 [Online] available at <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/refreshTableAction.do?sessionId=9ea7d07e30dcd247b519937c4d909261df02fe3369b7.e34MbxSahmMa40LbNiMbxMchmTe0?tab=table&plugin=1&pcode=tec00023&language=en>, accessed on September 1, 2019.
8. Fazekas, J, 'Central Administration', in Patyi, A. and Rixer, Á. (eds.) *Hungarian Public Administration and Administrative Law*, Passau: Schenk Verlag, 2014, pp. 287-303.
9. Fazekas, M., 'Közigazgatási bíráskodás a hatósági ügyeken túl (a Közigazgatási perrendtartás tárgyi hatályának néhány kérdése)', in Menyhárd, A. and Varga, I. (eds.), *350 éves az Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem Állam- és Jogtudományi Kara. A jubileumi év konferenciasorozatának tanulmányai. I. kötet*, Budapest, ELTE Eötvös Kiadó, 2018, pp. 208-223.
10. Fundamental Law of Hungary from April 25, 2011.
11. Hlebec, V., 'Family Care Experience in a Decentralized Social Home Care Context', 2017, *Lex Localis – Journal of Local Self-Government*, vol. 15, no. 3, pp. 495-511.
12. Hoffman, I., 'A helyi önkormányzatok társulási rendszerének főbb vonásai', 2011, *Új Magyar Közigazgatás*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 24-34.
13. Hoffman, I., Fazekas, J. and Rozsnyai, K., 'Concentrating or Centralising Public Services? The Changing Roles of the Hungarian Inter-Municipal Associations in the Last Decades', 2016, *Lex Localis: Journal of Local Self-Government*, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 451-471.
14. Hoffman, I., *Önkormányzati közszolgáltatások szervezése és igazgatása*, Budapest: ELTE Eötvös Kiadó, 2009.
15. Nagy, M. and Hoffman, I. (eds.), *A Magyarország helyi önkormányzatairól szóló törvény magyarázata*, Budapest: HVG-Orac, 2014.
16. Nagy, M., 'A helyi-területi önkormányzatok és az Alaptörvény', 2017, *Közjogi Szemle*, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 16-27.
17. Nagy, M., Hoffman, I. and Papp, D., 'A Comparative Research on Municipal Voluntary Tasks of Three Hungarian and Slovenian Municipalities', 2019, *Central European Public Administration Review*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 165-198.
18. Pálné Kovács, I., 'Modellváltás a magyar önkormányzati rendszerben', in Jakab, A. and Gajduschek, G. (eds.), *A magyar jogrendszer állapota*, Budapest: MTA TK JTI, 2016, pp. 583-599.

19. Rozsnyai, K.F., 'Current Tendencies of Judicial Review as Reflected in the New Hungarian Code of Administrative Court Procedure', 2019, *Central European Public Administration Review*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 7-24.
20. Setnikar-Cankar, S., 'Slovenia in Transition: Decentralization as a Goal', in Loughlin, J., Hendriks, F. and Lidström, A. (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Local and Regional Democracy in Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 642-663.
21. Swianiewicz, P. and Teles, F., 'The Institutionalization of Inter-Municipal Arrangements in Europe: Findings from the Unusual Suspects', 2019, *Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences*, no. 57E, pp. 119-136.
22. Szabó, T., 'Együttműködések és kistéleplési önkormányzati koordináció – az elmúlt évtizedek jogalkotásának közpolitikai hatásai', in Laki, I. and Szabó, T. (eds.), *Kényszerpályák és lehetőségek*, Budapest: Homo Oecologicus Alapítvány – TÖÖSZ, 2019, pp. 98-133.
23. Szigeti, E., 'A közigazgatás területi változásai', in Horváth, M.T. (ed.), *Kilengések. Köszolgáltatási változások*, Budapest-Pécs: Dialóg Campus, 2013, pp. 267-287.
24. Verebélyi, I. (ed.), *Az önkormányzati rendszer magyarázata*, Budapest: KJK-Kerszöv, 1999.